

Writing and Submitting an Op-ed

*An op-ed is an opinion piece printed in a newspaper/posted on website that presents an author's position on a topic related to current news. Op-ed authors are typically subject experts who are not affiliated with the media outlet that their piece is published in. The dominant characteristic of op-eds is that they present an opinion. The best op-eds usually present a **strong** opinion.*

Op-eds are generally 500-750 words long. They are not the same as letters to the editor, which are typically 50-200 words. Editors look for concise, well-written submissions that present a strong, well-supported opinion that readers are likely to find thought-provoking.

**The following is a list of general tips for writing and submitting an op-ed.
Tips related to *Keys to Safety* are included where appropriate.**

How to Write an Op-ed

- 1. Stick to one subject.** Do not use an op-ed to get several issues off your chest.
 - **Keys to Safety Tip:** Many topics related to fire service and to adult education are worthy of discussion. Presenting several of these topics in a single op-ed detracts from the core message. Focusing specifically on fire prevention and safety education for adult learners will help you build a clear and convincing argument.
- 2. Know what you're talking about.** Write about a topic you are knowledgeable about and make sure that any facts you use to support your opinion are accurate.
 - **Keys to Safety Tip:** Include relevant facts and figures from the *Keys to Safety* website and other reliable sources that provide adult education or fire safety statistics for your community to add credibility to your argument.
- 3. Lead with your opinion.** The first paragraph should include a strong statement of your opinion on the subject matter. You have a short time to present your main point and convince readers that the piece is worthy of their attention.
- 4. Collaborate.** If the subject matter spans multiple areas of expertise, team up with a co-author who complements your knowledge.
 - **Keys to Safety Tip:** An adult educator and a fire department representative would be ideal co-authors for a *Keys to Safety* op-ed since the core subject includes two unique areas of expertise: adult education and fire safety.

5. **Stay current and write fast.** Make sure your subject matter is currently in the news or about to be (pending a new vote or piece of legislation or event). Pay attention to what is happening in the news and submit your op-ed quickly as a relevant news item unfolds.
 - **Keys to Safety Tip:** If the local media covers your program’s participation in *Keys to Safety*, plan ahead and submit an op-ed that relates to the coverage. Or tie your op-ed into more general fire safety news, such as a story about K-12 fire safety education or an increase in local residential fires.
 - **Use technology to stay up to date.** Set up a Google Alert for fire safety in your community or follow local news outlets through social media (e.g., Twitter) or through an RSS feed to get the news as it breaks.

6. **Have a hook.** A hook is a way to connect your subject matter to something in the news that is of broad interest. If your subject matter is a “hard sell” that has limited appeal to the general public, use a creative hook to engage the editor/reader.
 - **Keys to Safety Tip:** Relate the need for fire prevention and safety education for adult learners to media coverage of *Keys to Safety* activities and also to stories about residential fires in the community. Include a personal appeal. Why do you care about the fire safety practices of your adult learners? Why should your readers care? Note that fire safety in each individual household contributes to the fire safety of a community as a whole.

7. **Use plain language.** Use language that is easy to read, understand, and use. Avoid using jargon specific to your subject area that the general public will not understand easily. If you have to use an acronym, spell it out the first time it appears in the text.

8. **Use short paragraphs.** Shorter paragraphs are easier for the reader. Paragraphs should be between 2 and 3 sentences in length. Aim for less than 100 words per paragraph.

9. Respect your reader. Recognize that your average reader is not an expert in your topic. Organize your argument in a logical way and include key information that will help readers understand your point if they are not already familiar with the subject.

- **Keys to Safety Tip:** Ask a friend who knows little about fire prevention and safety education or adult literacy to review the piece before you submit it if time allows. Ask for feedback both on the tone and on the clarity of the message. This process is only recommended if it can be completed in a short time frame so that submission is not delayed.

10. Write a strong ending. Use the end of your piece to drive your message home. Find a creative way to restate your opinion or make your point that leaves the editor/reader with a lasting impression.

How to Submit Your Op-ed

Decide where you want to submit your op-ed. While publishing in a major national outlet such as *The New York Times*, *Newsweek* and *USA Today* provides great exposure, these publications receive a staggering number of submissions, the overwhelming majority of which are rejected. You are more likely to get published in a regional newspaper and, especially, in local papers, which almost always give preference to writers from the local area. Websites such as “Slate” and “The Huffington Post” are also gaining in importance. Note that many news outlets ask that you do not submit your piece to multiple outlets at once. If your first submission is not published, try another outlet.

Follow the guidelines. Many newspapers and media websites post guidelines for op-ed submissions online or in print. If your target outlet provides these guidelines, be sure to adhere to them. If guidelines are not provided, contact the op-ed editor, who may be willing to provide tips specific to the publication.

Include your full contact information. Op-eds typically include an author’s name. The publisher may ask for a photo of you to accompany the op-ed as well. While your contact information most likely will not be published, the editor needs to be able to contact you to let you know if your submission has been accepted.

Send it in! Most newspapers now accept articles by email. If you cannot find a website for the outlet you wish to submit to, look in the op-ed section of the newspaper for submission instructions.

A typical submission email reads something like this:

“Dear Editor:

I respectfully submit this op-ed on the importance of fire prevention and safety education for adults with limited literacy exclusively to the Oregonian. My op-ed explains how helping the adults with limited literacy in our community understand how to protect their homes and families from the risk of fire will in turn make our entire community a safer place to live.”